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SUBJECT: LATEST FRONT IN SA'ADA WAR: YOUTUBE

SUMMARY

¶1. In the sixth war between the ROYG and Houthi rebels, the fighting has spread to a new front: Youtube. Houthis and their supporters have posted video clips online as part of a vigorous information campaign to publicize battlefield victories, allege ROYG atrocities against civilians and accuse Saudi Arabia of direct military involvement in the conflict. The ROYG has responded with its own videos from Sa'ada, showing civilians condemning the Houthis and describing them as "murderous brigands." Although propagandistic and difficult to verify, this video footage is drawing attention in the context of an information vacuum on the Sa'ada conflict, created by independent local and international media's lack of access to the conflict zone and official media's lack of credibility in reporting on the fighting. Internet penetration in Yemen remains extremely low, but satellite television stations and newspapers have begun using these web videos as sources in their reports on Sa'ada, thus extending the videos' reach far beyond Youtube.
END SUMMARY.

HOUTHIS TAKE THE BATTLE ONLINE

¶2. Houthi rebels have made web-based video content a central part of their information arsenal in the sixth Sa'ada war. Their media operation revolves around the website al-Minbar, a relatively sophisticated "news" clearinghouse of videos, stories and official statements from Houthi leaders. The videos have migrated to Youtube, mostly via the Youtube channel SadahOnline, self-described as "the truth the way it is in reality. Facts and scenes from the Sa'ada war, far from the propaganda and misinformation."

¶3. Many videos focus on Houthi military victories. A September 12 video compiles footage of seized and burnt-out ROYG military vehicles with Houthi military training sessions, while a narrator urges Houthis and their supporters to attack the enemy and promises them victory. A September 6 video juxtaposes scenes filmed through the crosshairs of Houthi weapons with scenes of ROYG military vehicles bursting into flames. An August 31 video shows a room crowded with shoeless uniformed men, allegedly ROYG soldiers captured by Houthi forces. Individual soldiers then denounce the regime and apologize for "the heinous crimes that the authorities have committed against the women, children, and people of Sa'ada," including shelling the homes and farms of civilians.

¶4. A September 7 video shows explosives allegedly seized from retreating ROYG forces in Malahiidh that are emblazoned with Saudi markings. (Note: ROYG sources later claimed that these weapons were remnants of Saudi military support for the royalists during Yemen's 1962-70 civil war. End Note.) The narrator says, "This is the kind of assistance that Saudi Arabia provides to the Yemeni people. We wonder if tools of killing and destruction were recommended by Allah among brothers."

ROYG: WE TUBE TOO

15. The ROYG, via official media, has fired back with its own videos from the conflict zone. Almost every day during the Ramadan "prime time" evening hours immediately following iftar when many Yemenis are watching television, official Yemen TV has aired interviews with civilians in Sa'ada condemning the Houthis and describing the death and destruction that the Houthis have inflicted on their villages. (Note: According to media contacts, local sheikhs are pressuring Sa'ada civilians to participate in these interviews. However, the civilians' stories are believed to be mostly genuine. End Note.) This video footage has migrated to the website of Ministry of Defense mouthpiece 26 September and also to Youtube. Much of the footage is on the Youtube channel of al-Motamar, the mouthpiece of the ruling General People's Congress. It ranges from President Saleh's August 19 speech in Sana'a vowing to put "the final nail in the coffin" of the Houthis, to Sa'ada civilians showing pots and pans from their kitchens riddled with Houthi bullets. A September 4 video shows a Sa'ada civilian listing the names of family members killed in the fighting; the reporter asks, "And who killed them?" eliciting the response, "The Houthis." Other civilians state that the Houthis closed down schools, forced children to fight on their side, and "beat people until their skin withered away and their bodies were awash with blood."

TRADITIONAL MEDIA TAKES THE BAIT

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16. Internet penetration in Yemen remains extremely low; there are only an estimated 300,000 internet users, representing roughly 1.5 percent of the population. Few of the Youtube videos have more than 3,000 views and a dozen comments. However, international and independent local media -- barred by the ROYG from traveling to the conflict zone -- have picked up the videos and used them as sources in their reporting. Al-Jazeera, Hizballah-affiliated al-Manar, and Iranian al-Alam TV stations have broadcast the Houthis' clips of captured ROYG tanks and military vehicles, as well as the clips of the alleged Saudi weapons; independent Yemeni media outlets al-Masdar, al-Tagheer, News Yemen and Mareb Press have also reported on the content of the Houthi videos and linked to them on their websites.

COMMENT

17. Most of the amateur video footage emerging from the Sa'ada conflict is propagandistic and difficult to verify. It does little to shed new light on a conflict zone from which credible journalists have been almost entirely excluded. However, it does point to the increasingly sophisticated future of information warfare, even in this remote region where electricity and telecommunications services are scarce.

END COMMENT.

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